

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Activity Title:

Create Aggressive Transit Marketing and User Enhancement Program

Activity Purpose and Overview:

Many sections of this Multi-Modal Transportation Study report identify the need and desire to add transit services to existing StarTran operations and to adjust aspects of the StarTran service model in an attempt to change the perception and desirability of using bus transit in Lincoln. Just as important as major operational and managerial changes is the necessary effort to market the changes to the community and to enhance the experience of the transit user. A public relations campaign is necessary to inform current users and potential users to explain not only what the changes are, but also what the intent is of the changes to the system. Also, user enhancements that make the use of transit more user friendly and enjoyable are part of the effort to “sell” transit as a viable and desirable modal option.

StarTran does market its current programs and services. Funding for current marketing efforts comes out of 2.5% of the overall operational budget, or \$187,500 annually, that is used for marketing, printing needs, promotions, the information line, an answering service, and other items. With potentially dramatic changes in StarTran services resulting from this multi-modal study, a concerted effort to inform the public and sell the new services is imperative. It is therefore proposed that the StarTran increased this portion of its budget to 4% of the overall operating budget to help sell the service changes. It is also proposed that an annual marketing review be conducted to review current marketing efforts and identify changes or additions to the marketing program that will make it as effective as possible.

Transit user enhancements are also a key component of making transit use more enjoyable and more attractive to riders. Such things as more convenient fare payment systems, automatic vehicle location systems, traveler information services, strategic bus turnouts, and local area circulators are examples of enhancements to the transit system that will attract new users and help retain current users. Efforts should be made to implement these items as part of the overall improvement of the StarTran system.

Through a more aggressive and effective marketing program, and with the implementation of user enhancements, StarTran transit system services will be better understood and enjoyed by both current and future patrons of the system.

Activity Description:

This section will briefly review current StarTran marketing programs. An explanation of the idea and need for an annual marketing review will be offered as well. Finally, a brief overview of user enhancements that will elevate the desirability and use of the transit system will be provided.

Current StarTran Marketing Efforts

Marketing is the process of planning and executing the pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods, services, and events to create and maintain relationships that will satisfy individual and organizational objectives. To accomplish this StarTran has a longstanding marketing program that has evolved over the years.

The following marketing efforts are ongoing and are part of the current marketing programs for StarTran:

- Routes and schedules on StarTran web-site, in printed form, and in a Ride Guide reference booklet (available at several outlet locations and by mail)
- Schedules are available in large print, braille, computer diskette and audiotape
- Phone operators are available 24 hours/7 days a week to disseminate route and schedule information
- 10 annual special events are conducted each year such as the Fourth of July Shuttle, Boo at the Zoo, Historical Tours, and Holiday Light Tours
- Presentations are given to daycare centers, cub scouts, senior centers, social service groups, and ethnic/cultural groups upon request
- Employee bus pass programs
- Big Red Express Cornhusker football game shuttle services
- Russ's Privilege Plus Discount program
- Promote StarTran services to Lincoln Public Schools and to UNL students
- Place marketing bill inserts in local water bills
- Advertising on buses to promote StarTran services

Within the last three years StarTran has developed and implemented three new programs. The **Passport Saver Program (PSST)** is a reward for loyal riders. Patrons who purchase and save eleven consecutive monthly passports get the twelfth one free. Also instituted in the last three years is the **Alternative Ride Home Program (ARH)**, which provides patrons a free ride from work or school to home for emergency situations. Finally, a **Summer Youth Pass** program for students during the summer months has been implemented for 2004. For \$35 youth patrons ages 6-18 can have unlimited access to StarTran routes during the months of June, July, and August.

Ongoing research and efforts are occurring on the following marketing concepts as part of the Advertising Strategic Plan:

- Development of alternative language translations for printed and training materials (found to be cost prohibitive under current budget constraints)
- Research on possibility of utilizing advertising inserts in electric, gas, and phone bills
- Cost analysis of web based trip planner for patrons to obtain route/schedule information

While the current marketing efforts are substantial, the proposed changes to StarTran operations and management systems that are included in this Multi-Modal Transportation Study report will challenge the effectiveness of the marketing program. With such dramatic changes possible, it will be necessary to not only adjust the marketing program, but the budget of the program will need to be increased to keep up with expansions in StarTran services. **As a result the Multi-Modal Task Force believes an increase in the StarTran marketing budget to 4% of the operating budget is necessary.**

Conduct an Annual Marketing Review

Increasing the marketing budget is not the only need or the only answer to the marketing challenges that will face StarTran in the future. **As part of a more aggressive marketing program, an annual marketing review is proposed as a needed action item by the Multi-Modal Transportation Task Force.** The purpose of such an effort is to annually look at and suggest adjustments to the marketing program for transit services provided by the City of Lincoln through StarTran. The project will review all elements of the marketing program including market research, customer information, user aids, incentive programs, and promotion. The review will be summarized in a final report.

In the first year a marketing program for the coming year also will be prepared. In subsequent years, the project will be limited to a review of the program.

These reviews typically are conducted by a marketing consultant. The consultant can provide an objective assessment of a program area that often is the subject of local scrutiny and criticism, but whose effectiveness sometimes appears difficult to evaluate.

This project is similar to other annual reviews that are conducted for small transit systems with limited marketing resources. For example, for over ten years, the award-winning transit system serving Ames, Iowa and Iowa State University has been conducting these annual reviews.

The annual reviews would cover the following three tasks:

1. **Review Marketing Materials.** The first step is to review the marketing materials prepared by the City of Lincoln and StarTran. These materials will include:
 - The annual plan for the marketing program.
 - Informational items such as public timetables, user guides, and public announcements.
 - Promotional items used to increase public awareness and transit usage.
 - Incentive programs designed to attract new users and encourage more use by existing riders.
 - Advertising campaigns and the use of “trade-outs” to stretch the advertising budget.
 - Market research results regarding the markets for transit in the community and the effectiveness of the different elements of the marketing program.

Staff will assemble and transmit the necessary materials to the marketing consultant. This will facilitate an efficient and concentrated review. It also will provide the background and direction for the next task.

2. **Conduct On-Site Interviews and Review.** In this task, the marketing consultant will interview key marketing members of the StarTran and City staff. The consultant also will meet with key elected officials and community leaders. Finally, the consultant will observe other on-site aspects of the marketing program such as the customer information center and the general consistency of appearance of visible aspects of the transit system such as buses, shelters, and bus stop signs.
3. **Prepare Review Report.** The plan would be based on the work in the previous tasks. It will present the results of the review and identify improvements that can be made within available resources.

In the first year of the project, a marketing program for the coming year also will be prepared. This program will describe the actions, associated costs, and schedule for the next year. It will serve as the template for future marketing plans that will be developed internally by city staff. Subsequent studies should be conducted annually. If possible, they should be completed before the next year’s transit budget is prepared.

Implement User Enhancements

Related to marketing efforts to inform the public of the programs and services available through StarTran is the level of user enhancements that are employed on the system to make the transit experience as enjoyable as possible. By providing a more enjoyable and efficient service the patron is more likely to continue to use the transit system, and word of the improved service will more likely entice other potential users to use transit. **A range of user enhancements should therefore be implemented as part of the StarTran delivery of services.**

An **Automatic Vehicle Location (AVL)** system provides up-to-date location information for transit vehicles. The AVL system consists of a GPS receiver on the vehicle, a communications link between the vehicle and the dispatcher, and computer-based tracking software for dispatch. By implementing such a system StarTran will be better able to conduct fleet management, track route performance, and identify the nearest bus to a transit stop and the time it will take for the bus to arrive at a transit stop. Such a system will allow StarTran to more efficiently provide transit services. Implementation of an AVL system is in the proposed 2004-2005 city budget. Implementation is expected to occur during the 2004-2005 fiscal year.

Traveler information systems are related to AVL technology in that the information that can be gathered through AVL systems is provided to the transit user to help plan routes and to estimate pick-up and drop-off times. This information can be provided at key boarding locations through interactive information kiosks. By providing this “real-time” information the transit patron is better served. Implementation of this technology at key boarding locations is estimated to cost between \$140,000 and \$200,000.

Farebox card reader technology enables patrons to utilize a debit card to make fare transactions instead of traditional fare devices. Using this technology will improve efficiencies along StarTran routes, and it will provide patrons a convenient method of fare payment. Also, a wide range of fare payment options would be available to the patron such as single trip cards, 10-trip pass cards, monthly, and even annual passes. The idea of developing this system with a universal application ability so that a card can be used for both transit fares and parking fares is also of interest. At this time StarTran is estimating that installation of this technology will cost approximately \$13,000 per vehicle (buses and vans).

Bus turnouts at strategic locations can provide transit users safer boarding locations. Such an enhancement is especially useful in high traffic areas. This also helps the flow of automobile traffic along busy streets because the bus is able to pull off of the travel lane while picking up and dropping off passengers. Construction of a bus turnout is estimated to cost \$11,000 to \$15,000 each.

Local area circulators are bus routes that serve specific areas such as large activity centers and transit hubs. This is another user enhancement that can improve transit services on a localized level. An example of this is a downtown shuttle. As a high use activity center, the Downtown is able to employ a circulator route. Those visiting the Downtown can benefit from such a service. The Downtown Master Plan study will specifically look at the idea of a circulator service in the Downtown area. Application of this user enhancement and service may be possible in other activity centers over time as multi-modal oriented design standards are implemented and land use changes occur.

Activity Time Line and Responsibility:

Phases I, II, III

The implementation of additional and different marketing techniques and programs will be the responsibility of StarTran staff. As discussed previously, there are ongoing and new marketing efforts implemented by StarTran on an annual basis. Some potential marketing strategies and techniques are a function of the size of the marketing budget provided to StarTran. With an increase in marketing funds, appropriate additional efforts can and should be implemented immediately or in the near term as StarTran service changes occur. New marketing efforts should be part of the annual Advertising Strategic Plan.

A marketing review should be conducted within two years of the issuance of the Multi-Modal Transportation Study final report. The marketing review should be undertaken using an outside marketing consultant to perform technical work. Existing StarTran staff should manage the project. The marketing review should involve the StarTran Advisory Board, StarTran administrators, StarTran patrons, and representatives from the community at-large. Subsequent annual reviews should be conducted to ensure updated information and techniques are being used.

An Automatic Vehicle Location system is scheduled for implementation in the 2004-2005 fiscal year. StarTran staff will be responsible for the completion of this project. Traveler information systems and farebox card reader technology are projects that are not currently included in the StarTran 6-year Capital Improvements Program (CIP). These user enhancements should be strongly considered for inclusion in the annual update of the CIP as funding becomes available.

Construction of bus turnouts is a function of identifying needed and appropriate locations for such a facility. This effort should be ongoing with staff from both StarTran and Public Works and Utilities participating in this process to identify locations in developed areas of the city. Planning Department staff will be involved in identifying appropriate turnout locations in proposed new developments through the development review process.

Implementation of local area circulators is dependent on both the design of StarTran service operations and the existence of appropriate high-use activity centers that can benefit

from such a service. The Downtown is such a location. The downtown shuttle concept will be studied as part of the Downtown Master Plan process set to begin in the summer of 2004. The findings of this portion of the Downtown Master Plan should be implemented by StarTran staff. Implementation of other local area circulators is considered a mid to long range process as changes in land use over time will be a determining factor.

Activity Resource Needs:

Existing city staff will be able to implement the various work tasks included in this activity. However, the marketing review should be undertaken using an outside marketing consultant to perform the technical work. It is estimated that additional resources in the amount of \$15,000 the first year and \$6,000 in subsequent years would be required to procure outside contractor assistance.

Specific costs of the various items included in this activity are:

- Increase StarTran's source of funding that provides its marketing budget from 2.5% of the operating budget, or \$187,500, to 4% of the operating budget, or \$300,000.
- Implementation of an AVL system at a cost of \$1.2 million is included in the CIP for the 2004-2005 fiscal year. 50% of this cost will be covered by federal funds.
- Implementation of a traveler information system is estimated to cost between \$140,000 and \$200,000. Federal funds could be used to fund a portion of this cost.
- Farebox card reader technology implemented throughout the StarTran fleet is estimated to cost approximately \$13,000 per vehicle. Federal funds could be used to fund a portion of this cost.
- Construction of a bus turnout is estimated to cost between \$11,000 and \$15,000. The number and location of needed and desired turnouts has not been identified.

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